

THE SURVEY OF SAN FRANCISCO'S MINORITIES:

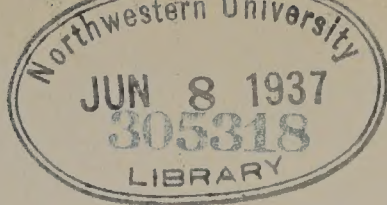
ITS PURPOSE AND RESULTS

by

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Abstract from the SERA Project 2-F2-98 (3-F2-145):

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The purpose of the cultural survey of San Francisco's minority groups, since it was an SEFA project, was primarily to find employment for so-called "white-collar" people who were temporarily on relief. There was considerable misgiving, at first, as to whether such a survey could possibly yield accurate or worthwhile results, in view of the fact that, with the exception of the supervisor, none of the investigators possessed any of the technical and academic requirements usually considered essential in such investigations. On the face of it these doubts were quite justified. It did seem, to say the least, somewhat optimistic to anticipate obtaining any illuminating information from individuals approached at random by non-trained interrogators selected at random and most of whom could hardly be expected to be in a frame of mind favorable to an objective gathering of facts.

The general subject of the survey was, of course, set. It was to study the steps in the adjustment and assimilation of minority groups in San Francisco and Alameda counties, from the time of their first arrival to the present time, with particular emphasis upon certain aspects of this acculturation, such as, for instance, the general making for the acceleration and retardation of this process and the specific influence of such major disturbance as the Depression.

Two possibilities were open. One was to so limit the scope of the problem that it could be approached by having resort to that gift of the gods, a formal and detailed questionnaire. This, however, would necessarily have narrowed the nature of the investigation. There are too many intangible elements involved in such complex processes as

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social adjustment and assimilation and for these the questionnaire method is of questionable value. The other possibility was to do just the opposite, to broaden the problem so that, at first, it would embrace practically everything which the people interviewed cared to tell and then, on the basis of this preliminary information, formulate the scope of the investigation.

I chose the second; with considerable trepidation, I will admit. The first week's data dispelled completely whatever doubts existed for it became perfectly clear that most individuals are more than willing to speak about themselves and that an almost equally large number are adept in asking them to do so. Within a very short time the survey was literally taken bodily out of the hands of the supervisor and became a cooperative undertaking to which each person made his special contribution. It also became clear, very soon that, broadly speaking a cooperative undertaking which develops of its own initiative and is not forcibly imposed upon individuals by an essentially alien outside source, not only removes the usual obstacles and resentments encountered, but actually stimulates the latent articulateness of individuals and allows scope for a creativeness hitherto unsuspected. In the course of the survey both investigated and investigators became, to all intents, artists. Those interviewed frequently told their story with a virtuosity professional writers might well envy and the interviewed, where a particular training had not ruined them, often retold these stories with equal skill.

Let me select, from among those sketches already published, just two for comment, the life story of the Lake Como peasant and the magnifi-

cent and realistic sketch to which I have given the title "The Eternal Peasant."* In the first case the interviewer was an experienced newspaper man and some of the phrasology may be his. But that is all. He transcribed the story as it was told him. It is this academically utterly untutored working class boy who, in the recital of his life is responsible for such a passage as: "So inch by inch, with the sweat of these little Italian boys, mine included, were built these beautiful snakelike roads on the Alps through which the roaring guns passed later, bringing destruction to the same people who, by the irony of fate, paved their way to death." And it is to him likewise that we owe the ending of his tale, "when my time comes I hope to leave behind in San Francisco, many clean windows (he was a janitor) and a respectable family."

In the second case I have selected, there is no pretense at giving the words of the individual interviewed. His command of English was manifestly utterly inadequate for this. Instead, we are given an inimitable portrait of a specific peasant who is, at the same time, the perfect representative of a whole type. It is creative art in its highest form. And yet it was written by a woman who had only had a grade-school education and who had been compelled to work hard all her life. She had never interviewed people before; she had never written before.

Now here was something that no one could have anticipated, something that grew out of a self-initiated cooperative effort during an

* Monograph No. 1, The Italians of San Francisco; Their Adjustment and Acculturation, SERA Project S-F2-98, San Francisco, July, 1935, pp.84-88 and 109-111.

economic crisis which, on the face of it, seemed specifically unfavorable to every form of creative art. To have dismissed its results as incidental or as alien to the specific problems studied, would have been a piece of academic idiocy and lack of understanding. Not only was this creative energy on the part of investigated and investigator important in allowing distressed and harassed individuals to function significantly and concretely in a crisis that made for demoralization, but it increased the excellence of the material bearing directly on the specific problems connected with the survey.

It cannot then be too strongly stated that whatever degree of success was attained in the survey was due to the fact that it took on, almost immediately, the character of a cooperative undertaking. The supervisor was simply a coordinator, a critical commentator, who could not have prophesized the character the survey was to assume nor why those implicated developed the efficiency they did. All of which is assuredly only a foretaste of what we can hope for and what we can legitimately anticipate in a world where the social-economic conditions are more consistently favorable to such undertakings than are those of our contemporary period.

So much then for the general nature of the undertaking. Before we discuss its specific sociological purposes, it might be well to call attention to some phases of the work that are of direct practical value in indicating how a better understanding between American and minority groups can be furthered.

There were, all in all, over a period of nine months, at least two hundred individuals employed on the project. Of these Americans,

meaning by this term for descriptive purposes, individuals both of whose parents were born here, formed 75 to 80 percent. In obtaining the information they came into intimate contact with minorities they knew only from heresay reports, from highly colored newspaper accounts, and from chance contacts. Most of them had the usual assortment of ill-founded prejudices both about the so-called inborn traits of foreigners and the degree of assimilation to American culture they were capable of.

They were now given an unexpected opportunity not only to meet them personally but to establish sufficiently close relations to persuade them to tell the story of their lives. And they learned from these narratives what an amazing and difficult adventure each one of these immigrants had embarked upon when he left his native home, to adjust himself to an entirely different world. They could not help being impressed and they could not help realizing how similar were the problems of these immigrants to those which had confronted their own ancestors when they first came to California. They were thus taught by direct experience that there were no inherent racial or national traits, that most of their prejudices were complete unfounded, that all human beings react in the same way to uncertain and unfavorable economic conditions and that, finally, demoralization and integration have nothing to do with the group to which an individual happens to belong culturally or racially. In other words, contact with these minorities tended to break down the irrational presuppositions with which most of the Americans operated and opened their eyes

to the fact that the cry against the foreigners was largely a slogan used by individuals and groups for economic exploitation. By understanding this they could help in expediting that assimilation and adjustment to American standards and the American ways of life upon which they so urgently insisted.

The sociological aims of the survey have already been discussed in the introduction to the Italian report. Let me repeat them here. The primary object was twofold, one practical and the other theoretical. The practical purpose had, as its objective, the attempt, on the basis of adequate information, to show the nature of the process or processes by which the foreign-born groups of San Francisco and Alameda counties were assimilated to American standards of living, to American types of behavior and to American attitudes of mind. The theoretical purpose on the other hand had as its objective the attempt to arrive at some estimate of the general factors involved in the changes that take place when an immigrant group, originating in one economic and cultural environment, comes into contact, over a period of years, with another group, possessing another economic and cultural environment, to which it must adapt itself.

The information obtained was divided into two groups, that which was definitely autobiographical, and that which consisted of comments on every imaginable topic of contemporary life, in San Francisco and the world in general. Since the survey was made in 1934-35, the General Strike and the effects of the depression were naturally favorite subjects, and since many of those interviewed had either themselves gone

through the Great War or whose fortunates had been specifically affected by it, we meet references to it in almost every account.

The first task confronting the editor was, of course, that of critically sifting this unusually rich data and of presenting it in such a manner that it would bear directly on the main problems of the survey. It seemed best to have this presentation take two forms, one consisting on monographic analyses of the minorities represented, and the other, of illustrative autobiographies. In the monographs three major subjects are to be discussed, first the composition of the population, second the social-economic environment from which the particular group came and third, its adjustment to American life. In the discussion of these major points the following scheme will be followed.

1. The Composition of the Population.

- a. Reasons for coming to the United States and California
- b. Route of entry to the United States and California

II. The Social-Economic Environment from which the group came

III. The Adjustment to American Life.

A. Occupations and Professions

1. Eventual Persistence of Former Occupations:

- 1. Without Interruption
- 2. With Interruption

II. Initial Persistence of Former Occupations:

- 1. Abandonment before the Depression
- 2. Abandonment after the Depression

III. Persistence of Occupation of Father and Son:

- 1. In Italy
- 2. In the United States

IV. Change of Occupation:

1. Betterment of Condition in United States
2. Deterioration of Condition in United States:

- a. Undemoralized
- b. Demoralized
- c. On Charity or Relief

B. Social Customs

- I. Food Habits
- II. Standards of Comfort
- III. Knowledge of English
- IV. Knowledge of American Institutions and Attitudes
- V. Standards of Behavior

C. New Development

- I. Literature
- II. The Theatre
- III. Music
- IV. Sports

D. The Adjustment of the Second Generation to American Life

- I. Those who arrived here as minors
- II. Those born in the United States

E. Criticism of American Standards and Institutions

F. The Effects of the Depression upon Living Standards and Attitudes

CONCLUSIONS AND INFERENCES

The analyses in the monographs are to be based exclusively on the data obtained by the interviewers and the incidental material they furnished or called attention to, such as books, newspapers, etc.

In order to take care of the illustrative autobiographical material as well as other interesting information, it seemed best to include them in special bulletins, varying in size.

The present plan thus contemplates the following series of monographs and bulletins:

Monographs

1. The Italians (Parts I and II have already appeared)
2. The Japanese
3. The Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians
4. The Chinese
5. The Irish, Scotch and English
6. The French
7. The Jews
8. The Mexicans
9. The Spanish and Portuguese
10. The Russians
11. The Roumanians and Slavic Peoples of the Balkans
12. The Greeks
13. The South Americans
14. The Filipinos
15. The Finns
16. The Armenians, Syrians and other Peoples of Asia Minor
17. Conclusions and Interpretations

Bulletins

1. The Survey of San Francisco's Minorities: Its Purpose and Results
2. The World called San Francisco: Representative Autobiographies
3. Sao Paulo has Revolution
4. Mickey, the Syrian, tells the story of his life
5. Joe: An Italian Proletarian
6. Them were the Days: Recollections of a German Officer
7. Old Country Memoirs
8. Chinese-American Life as told by an American-born Chinese

9. Childhood in Japan: Reminiscences of a Japanese-born American
10. Wanderings of an Irishman in California
11. The Memoirs of a Roumanian
12. Two Americans come to California
13. The Autobiography of a Finn
14. The Autobiography of a Scandinavian
15. The Social Philosophy of Nicherenism, as told by a Japanese Buddhist Priest
16. Two Russian Officers
17. Ten Japanese and a Yankee
18. The Impressions of C.W.A. by Those Who were on it.

In conclusion let me again call attention to the cooperative nature of the survey and emphasize anew the points made before, that the completeness and the excellence of the results were due entirely to this fact. If the names of the interviewers and the interviewed are not mentioned, this does not mean that their work has lost any of its individual and creative character, any more than the fact that the editor's name is mentioned means that he is to be given undue credit.

Is Nothing Immune to This Vandalism?

FEB 4 - 1935



THE public has difficulty in understanding the workings of the Communist mind. The Communists here, as the recent expose has shown, are willing to accept the bounty of the Government to keep themselves in food and shelter; and while living on that relief, try to undermine the very

government, the very system which makes that relief possible. The Soviet allows its Russian critics to starve, when they are not shot. America fattens its critics with public funds!

Which system is humane!

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"Survey of San Francisco's Minorities" and SERA Political "Cartoon (color photocopies)

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